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# Building the Peace in Central America

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*Following is a speech by Thomas O. Enders, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, before the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, California, August 20, 1982.*

The obstacles to peace in Central America stand more clearly exposed with every new crisis. Central America has deep political divisions, among nations as well as within them. It suffers severe economic troubles, with the world recession devastating economies already weakened by high oil prices and internal inefficiencies. And it is fragmented by social tensions, with population growth straining public services and popular aspirations outrunning the historically possible.

But the tangle of violence that has taken so many lives traces directly to the clash of two polar approaches to these problems. One is the way of the violent right—to ignore socioeconomic problems and, when that proves impossible, to shoot the messengers of despair. The other is the way of the violent left—to magnify injustices and provoke confrontations so as to rationalize shooting their way to power.

The persistence with which extremist minorities seek to resolve the region's problems by the use of violence dominates the outside world's perception of Central America. Yet the real story of Central America's last 3 years is that first the right and now the left have steadily lost ground to those who believe democracy and the rule of law—not violence—are the only feasible path to progress.

## An Outline

Let me take a minute to outline that story. For it provides a key to the real opportunities now emerging to end the violence and build the peace. We used to think of Central America as a collection of petty dictatorships. And so—if you except Costa Rica's vigorous democracy and allow for the coarseness of the stereotype—it often was. That does not mean that there was not economic growth and social change. Often, indeed, vigorous economic development and social change collided with unchanging, unresponsive, and sometimes repressive political institutions.

The old order cracked with the flight of Somoza in July 1979. For more than 40 years, the Somozas ruled Nicaragua. But little by little the regime lost support—of the church, of the press, and of businessmen and professionals, many of whose sons and daughters took to the hills or the streets—and in the end it was making war on its own people.

A few months later, the repressive government of General Romero in El Salvador, the latest in a string of military governments that had run that country since the 1930s, was overthrown by a group of young officers pledged to create democratic institutions and reform the cruelly unequal landholding system.

It is one of history's less happy patterns that extremism breeds extremism. Instead of seeing the weakening of traditional dictatorships as an opportunity to organize democracy, the fall of Somoza and the troubles of other established governments whetted the appetites of radicals with motivations ranging from the utopian to the cynical. In Nicaragua, a hard core of Marxist-Leninist ideologues began to consolidate a monopoly of force with Cuban assistance, building the largest military establishment in Central American history.

Convinced their own power would be safe only if similar governments were installed elsewhere in Central America, Nicaragua's new *caudillos* joined with Cuba to train and supply violent leftists in El Salvador attempting to seize power by exploiting the turbulence unleashed by the breakdown of traditional order and the new government's reform efforts.

Central America's violent left burst on stage claiming to have history on its side. The claim reflected two practical advantages. One was psychological. The combination of ignorance and revulsion with which the outside world views Central America enabled men and women trained mainly in the arts of terror to portray themselves as liberators. The other was military. Government forces were certainly authoritarian, but they were also weak, garrison bound, and internationally isolated. As of 1979, the armies of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were all cut off from U.S. training, sales, or even purchases; then, as now, Costa Rica had no army. In contrast, guerrilla forces could draw upon local alienation, extensive support from Cuba—in training, arms, and propaganda—and the help of terrorists from South America and even the Middle East.

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Ironically, these advantages backfired. Overconfidence in both their popular appeal and their outside arms supplies led the Salvadoran guerrillas to militarize their strategy. In early 1981, they launched a "final offensive" that failed disastrously. In March 1982 they tried to prevent elections and instead provoked a massive turnout of voters in repudiation of what the guerrillas stood for. Although many of them fight on, El Salvador's guerrillas stand revealed as a destructive minority rejected by Salvadoran society.

Similar misjudgments have also warped the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Little by little the Sandinistas have pushed aside those whose sacrifices helped bring down Somoza—the free press, the church, political parties, unions, the private sector. Some 2,000 Cuban and Eastern-bloc military and security advisers have merged with the regime's leadership. With disenchantment spreading even among Sandinista heroes like Eden Pastora, "Commandante Cero," there is now open repression against religious leaders and ethnic minorities—the very groups whose protection is the essence of pluralism. History is beginning to repeat itself. Elections have been postponed, demonstrations are increasingly frequent, and some groups have even taken up arms. The new Nicaraguan regime is turning into a new dictatorship based once again on a privileged and militarized caste. Like the Somoza regime before it, Nicaragua's government is beginning to make war on its own people.

### Alternatives to Violence

But if the violent left is not sweeping the isthmus, the beneficiaries have not been its traditional rival, the violent right. When the military government of El Salvador was overthrown nearly 3 years ago, the new reforming junta was challenged not only by the extreme left's guerrillas but also by the extreme right acting through death squads and some elements of the security forces. The result was an explosion of violence. Eighteen months ago anywhere from 600 to 2,000 civilians were losing their lives each month, depending on whose figures you accept. The country was sick with political violence.

That sickness has not yet been cured. But its virulence has been checked. In the last few months, noncombatant deaths have averaged 300 to 500 a month—again, depending on whom you believe—and appear to be declining steadily. This is still a horrible toll in a country of 5 million people, but 300 to 1,500 fewer deaths a month is undeniably a positive trend.

Why is political violence declining in El Salvador? It has partly been a matter of the consolidation of the new reforming government, which has gradually contained guerrilla violence and increased its authority over security forces, gradually creating a climate in which violence is less and less expedient, even if it is still not adequately deterred and controlled and punished.

But I think there is something even more important at work here. Nascent democratic institutions are providing an alternative to violence as a means of political expression. In the March election, six parties ranging from extreme right to center left competed in a campaign that was not violence free but which was not meaningfully influenced by the use of force. The new Salvadoran democracy is doing what it is supposed to do—bringing a broad spectrum of forces and factions into a functioning political system.

At the same time, a broad land reform has for the first time given *campesinos* a personal stake in society. Twenty percent of all farmland has been redistributed from some 2,000 owners, many of them absentees, to 60,000 poor farmworkers and their families.

Perhaps the most striking measure of progress is the transformation of the military from an institution dedicated to the status quo to one that spearheads land reform and supports constitutional democracy.

The shift toward democracy is not limited to El Salvador. In November 1981 a massive turnout voted in a new democratic government in Honduras after many years of military rule. This February, a similar turnout reaffirmed Costa Rican democracy and voted the Social Democratic opposition into government. Not incidentally, in democratic Costa Rica and Honduras, as in El Salvador, the extreme left received practically no popular support in the elections.

Meanwhile in Guatemala a coup overthrew a repressive government that was fighting organized guerrillas with increasingly indiscriminate violence. The new government—although still military—has greatly reduced official abuses, is discussing Constituent Assembly elections, and has replaced the old hostility and suspicion toward rural villagers with efforts to give them the means to develop and defend their communities.

In a word, alternatives have appeared to the violent extremes of Central America's past.

### U.S. Role

The United States has played a key role in nurturing these alternatives. Belatedly and at first fitfully, but with a steadiness all the more striking for the fact that we have kept our basic course under two quite different U.S. administrations, we have thrown our weight behind the well-being and security of our neighbors.

The great bulk of our effort has been economic and political. No less than 85% of all aid authorized by or requested of the Congress for fiscal years 1981 to 1983 is economic. To enable the countries of the area to earn their own way in the future, the President has proposed an innovative program of tariff concessions and tax incentives, the Caribbean Basin initiative, which Congress is now considering. Its passage would provide a vital impulse to confidence and peace in the region.

Equally important has been our political commitment. Agrarian reform was a Salvadoran idea, but it could not have gotten off the ground in 1980 if we had not backed it. And it might have died this spring if we had not persisted in our support. The elections in Honduras and El Salvador were also developed locally, but they easily could have derailed had we not backed them so strongly. Nor are human rights an import from the United States. The great majority of Central Americans long for an end to lawlessness. But we do believe that the constancy of our interest has helped them make progress toward controlling human rights abuses.

At the same time, we have not ignored legitimate needs for security assistance. Faced with the guerrilla offensive in El Salvador and realizing that a Communist network was funneling weapons and ammunition in support of that offensive, President Carter authorized military sales to El Salvador. President Reagan has continued to provide military assistance. The amounts have been and remain much less than our economic aid and the items unsophisticated.

We have no wish or intention to prolong or spread the conflict—quite the opposite. But we could not and we will not stand idly by and watch, in El Salvador or elsewhere, internationally recognized governments—undertaking reforms we support—having to throw untrained recruits short of ammunition into battle against Cuban-trained guerrillas supplied and coordinated from abroad.

By the same token, we are giving limited military assistance to Honduras, which has become a new Cuban and

Nicaraguan target for terror and armed intimidation. Even Costa Rica, a country without an army, has come to us to discuss security assistance. Its people, too, fear the threat of an aggressive Nicaragua with mushrooming armed might and dedicated to the export of violent revolution.

**What Remains To Be Done**

If much has been accomplished, much remains to be done. In El Salvador, the democratic transformation must be completed: presidential elections held, the system of justice reestablished, the land reform defended, the violence and destruction ended, and the still dangerous guerrillas convinced that they cannot shoot their way to power and that they will have to compete for it at the polls.

In Guatemala, the democratic transformation must be begun, the abuses of Indians and others in the countryside ended, and the *campesinos* enabled to develop in peace.

In Honduras and Costa Rica and El Salvador and Guatemala, weak, bankrupt, or near-bankrupt economies must be refloated, and helped to attract new investment and trade.

In Nicaragua, a way back must be found from ever greater concentration of power and militarization—and from ever greater repression of its own citizens and ever greater danger to its neighbors.

Of all these problems, it is Nicaragua that is the most worrisome. It was the new Sandinista government that regionalized the conflict in Central America by backing the violence in El Salvador. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega once told me that the FMLN [Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front], the Salvadoran guerrilla coalition, is "*nuestro escudo*"—"Nicaragua's shield." And Sandinista support has not lessened. The FMLN's headquarters are in Nicaragua. It receives sustained logistic support from Nicaragua, above all by airdrop and sea delivery but also by land. Its training camps are in Nicaragua.

And now Nicaragua is expanding the violence to Costa Rica and Honduras. As more and more Nicaraguans have voted with their feet—13,000 Miskito and Sumo Indians and thousands of ex-Sandinistas have followed anti-Sandinistas into neighboring havens—Managua has begun to pressure and threaten its neighbors. In downtown San Jose, Nicaraguan intelligence officers operating out of the Nicaraguan Embassy organize terrorism, including bombing an airline office, while Nicaraguan troops cross into Costa Rican territory and harass small farm owners and Nicaraguan planes violate Costa Rican airspace. In Tegucigalpa, the Sandinista-backed Salvadoran FMLN recently blacked out the capital by dynamiting the electrical system, while Nicaragua threatens Honduras overtly, mobilizing its army and militia and redeploying troops along the Honduran frontier.

What can be done to sustain and develop the alternatives to the irresponsible spread of violence? Clearly, so long as violent minorities from within—or hostile neighbors from without—assert the right to use force, there can be no alternative to military preparedness and the maintenance of security. The United States will help its friends in the area to defend themselves from both threats, as long as it is necessary.

But this response alone is not enough. We must also seek out and explore every opportunity for reconciliation and peace. His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, recently emphasized this moral imperative in separate letters to the bishops of Nicaragua and El Salvador. In both, he called for reconciliation and unity. The letter to Nicaragua was censored by the Sandinistas, who first officially prevented its publication, then reversed themselves. In his letter to El Salvador, after noting the "new institutional perspectives recently opened" by the elections, the Pope said that "an indispensable condition for accommodation [is] the ceasing of all hostilities and the renunciation of the use of arms."

This is not an impossible dream. Steps are available to give substance to the Pope's vision. The opportunities for reconciliation are most evident in El Salvador. Out of that country's travail have come a constituent assembly, a provisional coalition government, and a commitment to continued democratization. Some of the forces previously enamored of violent solutions—mainly from the far right—have begun to abide by the law and participate in the political process. Others—mainly from the far left—have yet to find a way to withdraw from their commitment to violence.

The new government in El Salvador has seen the opportunity. On August 3, at President Magana's initiative, the leaders of the political parties joined with the President to adopt a united action plan to end divisions within El Salvador. One of the plan's key elements is the creation of a new Commission for Peace. The commission is to comprise institutions, groups, and respected individuals charged specifically with evaluating the requirements for peace and proposing solutions. Together with similar new commissions on human rights and on the political process, the Commission for Peace is an important further step toward national reconciliation.

These are all very positive signs. The important thing is to do them seriously. Amnesty must offer genuine security with the participation of the church and international organizations. And dialogue must involve listening as well as talking, giving an opportunity to adversaries to explain how they could participate in the new democratic institutions. The United States very much hopes the new government will act with speed and imagination in this vital area.

**Regional Proposals**

Building the peace on a regional basis is even more complex. Order among nations requires order within nations as well as arrangements that respect their territorial integrity and national identity. The regionalization of tensions derives from crises in all these areas.

Here too, bases for progress exist. The issues are too numerous to be subject to simple sweeping solutions. But many individual proposals and possibilities exist to deal with particular pieces of the problem.

Honduras has put forward a proposal for peace with Nicaragua calling for an end to border incursions, a freeze on imports of heavy weapons, and comprehensive verification. These proposals have been endorsed by its partners in the Central American Democratic Community—Costa Rica and El Salvador.

The United States has also made proposals. Beginning nearly a year ago and more intensively since April, we have attempted to engage Nicaragua in a dialogue. We have tried to respond to Nicaragua's concerns, while meeting those of Nicaragua's neighbors, and our own.

The Sandinistas tell us that they fear an invasion by the United States. So we have offered to enter into a formal nonaggression agreement. The Sandinistas tell us that ex-Somocistas are training in the United States to invade Nicaragua. We have assured them that we are enforcing our Neutrality Act, which makes it a federal crime to launch an attack, or to conspire to attack, another country from the United States.

The Sandinistas tell us we are regionalizing the conflict, preparing Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica as bases for action against them. So we have suggested that each country in

Central America agree to put a reasonable, low limit on the numbers of foreign military and security advisers it has, and we have suggested that each country pledge not to import any additional heavy offensive weapons. Both commitments, of course, would have to be subject to international verification.

Nicaragua would also have to meet the concerns that its neighbors and we share. We asked that Nicaragua cease its involvement in the conflict in El Salvador. The Sandinistas say that they are not aware of any such involvement, but are willing to end it if we just give them the information we have. In our most recent exchanges we suggested that removing the combined guerrilla headquarters from Nicaragua would be a good place to start and offered to help the Sandinistas locate it. For example, the point from which guerrilla operations in El Salvador are being directed was recently in a Managua suburb. We are confident that although it moves around a great deal within Nicaragua it can be found. Nicaragua has yet to respond.

Similarly, Nicaragua must cease its terrorist and other aggressive actions against Honduras and Costa Rica.

We have raised a second issue, which also deeply concerns Nicaragua's neighbors. This is the trend in the organization and use of state power in Nicaragua. It is, of course, for Nicaragua to decide what kind of government it has. No one challenges that. We don't. Its neighbors don't.

But we believe we are all entitled to ask what assurance can any of us have that promises of noninterference will be kept if the Nicaraguan state remains the preserve of a small Cuban-advised elite of Marxist-Leninists, disposing of growing military power and hostile to all forms of social life but those they dominate? And we are also entitled to ask what is to become of internationally recognized human rights under these conditions? Such questions are not a defense, secret or otherwise, for a return to a discredited Somocismo. They could be answered in the fulfillment of the Sandinistas' own original commitments to democracy and regional peace.

### The Need for Action

These are some of the ideas we have advanced, not in any prescriptive sense but to start a dialogue to generate a response, to try to create a climate. There is no one way to guarantee peace in Central America. But our collective experiences suggest action is necessary on each of four fronts.

- Within each state there should be a process of reconciliation in which adversaries can substitute political competition for armed competition. This implies, as indicated by His Holiness the Pope, a renunciation of violence and incorporation within the civic process. Given the deep divisions in each country, this requires that democratic, or at least pluralistic, institutions be respected or established and broad participation in them encouraged.
- Between states there should be an end to the export of subversion. This means the removal, subject to comprehensive verification, of the headquarters, logistical support, and training camps of guerrilla movements installed outside the country of their origin.
- There should be an end to heavy arms buildups that threaten neighbors and disrupt the traditional regional military equilibrium. The easiest way would seem to be a commitment by all countries in the area not to bring in specified weapons, such as more tanks or combat aircraft—also subject, of course, to verification.
- Finally, there should be limits to foreign involvement, particularly in matters affecting security, to help the region forge its own peaceful equilibrium on its own terms. Each country should put a common ceiling on the number of outside military and security advisers and troops, subject to reciprocity and full verification. Why not make it zero?

A number of democratic countries—the United States, Honduras, Costa Rica, and others—have all attempted a dialogue with Nicaragua this past year. We have little to show for it. But we should not abandon this idea. Rather, perhaps the democratic countries should come together and see whether they cannot formulate a common approach. The potential cornerstones of peace are there. The question is how to put them together.

In the past the United States has generally neglected Central America—only to send in the troops when things got out of hand. U.S. troops are no solution now. What can help is sustained U.S. commitment—not only in helping to overcome violence and not only in helping restore and develop economies but in the development of democratic institutions. For everything we know about the 20th century tells us that governments that must face the people in elections do not long abuse their human rights. Nor do they often threaten their neighbors.

I will grant you that that is a tall order. But in a region important to us because of its strategic position, because of its proximity, because of our human ties with it, nothing less will do. We cannot walk away. ■

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